

“Le Château, 1925-2025”

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- X Its cornerstone having been laid on Bastille Day 1924, Le Château was inaugurated on June 16, 1925, by Prof. André Morize of Harvard, friend of President Paul Moody and appointed to lead the French Summer School beginning in 1926.

In his speech, Morize proclaimed it – “[the] most beautiful French house in any American institution, a graceful French thing on American soil.”

We credit 1925 as the birthdate of this first purpose-built *maison française* in America, but it actually marks the fruition of an idea that had been more than a decade in gestation in the hands of others than Moody and Morize.

Moody’s predecessor, President John Thomas (presidency 1908-1921) had presided over an ambitious expansion of the Middlebury campus, faculty, and curriculum. He oversaw the establishment of the summer language schools with their concept of total immersion, beginning with the German School in 1915 and the French School in 1916.

For the latter, Thomas appointed Middlebury alumnus H. P. Williamson de Visme who would lead the Middlebury program until 1924, growing it from an initial 20 students to some 200.

- X De Visme, who had founded a school of French for Americans at the Château of Soisy-sous-Étiolles outside of Paris, harbored a dream of establishing a similar setting for Middlebury French students.
- X In 1920 he established a *maison française* in the former Logan House hotel at 2 Park Street in downtown Middlebury, housing his family and 17 students in a French-only setting that could also accommodate other students for meals.

This was not the first *maison française* in the U.S. Interestingly, though, there was a Middlebury connection with the first. A. Barton Hepburn, Middlebury

trustee and major benefactor from 1905 to 1922, was president of the France-American Committee of New York. In 1913 he donated a town house on 117th Street to Columbia University to establish America's first *maison française* as a center for French studies and cultural resources at the university, headquarters of his committee, and accommodations for visiting faculty.

Thus by 1920 Middlebury had three major figures inclined toward the concept of a French house. President Thomas resigned in 1921, and Barton Hepburn died in 1922. De Visme, however, would be around until 1924.

In 1922 he flew the idea of a *château* like that at Soisy to house the French program with then new president Paul Moody. He envisioned a French manor house in a "simple vigorous style, unmistakably French in character, ... domestic in character, which is fitting for a school in which students live, and where the purpose is to inculcate French thought through contact with French daily life and customs."

De Visme's vision inspired Frederika Holden, a 1922 summer student from Proctor, Vermont. The following January, Miss Holden pledged a sum of \$62,500 to be matched by the college for the construction of a French house on campus. The trustees readily accepted, and President Moody engaged architect James Layng Mills to realize de Visme's vision.

- X Mills, a friend of President Moody, had a New York- and Boston-based practice recorded as mostly for institutional work that included hospitals, prisons, and orphanages. However, he was practiced in historic styles, having earned his French credentials with two years of study at the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris from 1903 to 1905 – as is witnessed by his elaborate Beaux-Arts rendering of a monumental staircase on the screen.
- X His initial plans for the Château, illustrated in the 1923 bulletin of the French School, were ambitious, with a two-story refectory, salons, multiple classrooms, and rooms for 57 students. The estimated cost of \$150,000, however, was too rich for the trustees, who set a cap at \$125,000.

- X The ultimate result sacrificed a large wing, but it did accommodate a *grand salon*, a library, a lower-level dining room for 70, classrooms, offices, accommodations for a directress, and space for 45 students, all illustrated in the bulletin of 1926. The mix of functions essentially foresaw, though in francophone form, what ultimately would become the program for the College's commons project some seventy years later.

Externally, the Château was unmistakably French, with its dormers and peaked towers.

- X Its style was claimed to be based on the Henry IV wings of the Château of Fontainebleau, typified by stuccoed walls and brick framing around doors and windows.
- X The stucco at Fontainebleau is yellow, and that originally determined the color at Middlebury, as witnessed by a postcard and the image in the background of a 1950 portrait of Leah Binand, directress from 1929 to 1955.
- X The French style and yellow color set the Château apart on what was a predominantly grey stone and Georgian campus.
- X But then, the building was set far apart from the rest of the campus anyhow.
- X Its location seemed pre-ordained by an ambitious master plan for the campus commissioned from W. Nicholas Albertson by President Thomas in 1909. This addressed the idea of separate campuses for men and women.

The men's campus would evolve behind Old Stone Row with academic buildings for the natural and social sciences, residential halls, a gym, and a football field in what is now the main quadrangle.

The women's campus, on land donated by Joseph Battell north of College Street, would have residence halls and deal with such subjects as home economics and languages. The latter is not surprising, given the predominance of women participating in the language programs. For instance, of 200 enrollees in the French summer school of 1920, 187 were women.

The women's buildings were envisioned as a formal cluster on the western ridge of the campus, with spectacular views of both the Green Mountains and the Adirondacks. From there the campus would descend to an oval French garden on axis with the men's football field on the south campus.

The master plan produced the site of Pearsons Hall in 1911 on the ridge, and a decade-plus later created the ideal location for the Château overlooking the projected garden that never developed, its front door on axis with the McCullough men's gym.

- X The Château was, of course, an anomaly on an otherwise Georgian revival campus. Two later master plans, developed under President Moody in an attempt to excite potential donors to contribute to the women's campus, tended to snub it. Both the Georgian-style York and Sawyer plan of 1931 ...
- X ... and the Dwight James Baum plan of 1933 did their best to banish it as if it were an embarrassment.
- X Both plans were too ambitious for Middlebury, and as they were abandoned with the construction of Battell Hall in 1950-55, the Château became the queen of its own quadrangle and took on its present grey and red color scheme.
- X Over the years its distinctive French character drew and was enhanced by embellishments, beginning with the bust of Marianne above the main door.
- X In the 1950s the Grand Salon was hung with an extensive collection of royal Bourbon portraits, the gift of Francophile entrepreneur James Hazen Hyde.
- X In 1959 the building drew the gift of what has become one of the college's most precious works of art – the eighteenth-century paneled interior that had originally decorated the *petit salon* of the Hôtel d'Aumont-Crillon on the Place de la Concorde in Paris. The interiors of the mansion had been dismantled in 1906 during its conversion into a luxury hotel.
- X Miss Susan Bliss and her mother purchased the panels of two of the Crillon interiors to install in their East Side Manhattan mansion. In the 1940s Miss

Bliss began dismantling and disposing of these interiors as she in turn converted her home into multiple apartments. One Crillon room was to find its way to the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

- X Through an idea reputedly planted by the French cultural attaché in New York, the second room was gifted to Middlebury's Château. In 1959 the panels arrived in Middlebury along with the funding to pay for their restoration, adaptation, and installation by architect R. Barfort King and restorer Henry Courtais – transforming the original Château library into the Louis Seize Room.

The library moved into what had been the directress' quarters, and the refitted room, its paneling reconfigured to fit the space and furnished with historically appropriate pieces from Miss Bliss' collection, served for special functions. It often remained locked in its later years because of its perceived value.

Serially damaged by a student-triggered fire sprinkler system in 1989 and then a failed steam valve in 1990, the room was dismantled, and the paneling was sent to the Williamstown art conservation lab. In the restoration process the specialists were able to identify original as opposed to reproduction panels.

- X In combination with archival drawings in France, this enabled reconstructing the twice-refitted room in its original form. Judged too precious to reinstall in a student dormitory, it has remained in storage pending permanent installation as a part of the college art collection.
- X Its story is celebrated in a new monograph and in an installation in the college museum that is currently up at the college museum. No longer a part of the Château itself, it remains an important part of its story. If you have not done so already, we invite you to visit the exhibit as part of this centennial celebration of a unique and special Middlebury building.
- X Le Château may no longer function as an exclusively francophone residence on campus, but it remains an enduring material symbol of Middlebury's important role in foreign language study.

Thank you.